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Regarding the Legendary Status of Wilno and Lwów

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Bronisław Pasierb

**REGARDING THE LEGENDARY STATUS
OF WILNO AND LWÓW**

Bez Lwowa i Wilna Polska być nie powinna
(a quote taken from a contemporary obituary)

1.

The following paper has been inspired by an obituary published in the local press. In it, the relatives and the family bade farewell to their beloved deceased who had throughout his long lifetime on Earth been accompanied by a motto only rarely expressed publicly. Its essence was included in the aphorism stating that *Bez Lwowa i Wilna Polska być nie powinna* [Without Lwów (Lvov) and Wilno (Vilnius) Poland should not be]. The meaning of this statement may be interpreted differently – as an expression of some natural nostalgia for one’s home town, manor house, hamlet or, in general, *Kresy Wschodnie* [Eastern Borderlands]. That kind of feeling is understandable and does not require any comments.

However, that aphorism might have also expressed an attitude of an articulate opposition *vis-a-vis* the Polish state which had indeed been recreated „without Lwów and Wilno”. Therefore, its new shape, new borderline, new political regime, traditions, culture or alliances did not meet the expectations [of the deceased]. On the one hand, anything that came from the „East” then, molded in the fashion of the „Eastern ally”, could have only become a source of Polish frustrations. On the other hand, the postwar world order was co-created by the Soviet Russia and constituted an expression of the victors’ aspirations. Nonetheless, for a considerable part of the Polish society, especially those Poles that had been resettled to the new „kresy zachodnie” [Western Borderlands] and who had come from the „Borderland” where they had

already experienced some of the „Soviet experiments” before, those post-war decisions were hard to accept. This was the background against which Polish anti-communism developed and resistance emerged to the slogans speaking about the „world-wide revolution” which generated fear and horror not only among those Poles who used to live in *Kresy Wschodnie*. According to A. Walicki, contemporary „supposed »anti-communists« have no idea, what communism was all about and what they have been saved from. They must have had no idea about it if they want to regard PRL [Polish People’s Republic] as a communist state and themselves as victims of its »totalitarian repressions«” (Walicki 1999: 379).

What were the real Polish choices at that historical moment created by the last years of WW II? Theoreticians have no doubt that a free choice was virtually non-existent then since the USSR’s declarations were not reliable. This is why from the vantage point of so called objective alternatives Poland had just been included in the system of states that were to implement „socialism”. The alternative was thus restricted to the framework dominated by the so called socialist model of development. Individuals active at that time in the political field were just given a political program of stalinization to be implemented in the Soviet fashion. It needs to be said that the chosen option had not won a wide-spread popular support and it gradually became meaningless when compromised by radical social movements. The first serious signal was sent by Poznań workers in June 1956. They were harbingers of the October „political turn”, which simultaneously meant the first hope to abolish the „Stalinist model” and embark on the road to reform the state. That was a real opportunity. Even if it was difficult and prolonged in time, it ultimately proved successful in Poland (Topolski 2004: 238–244).

However, the motto quoted at the beginning of the present paper includes yet another truth – a more universal one which has it that human beings struggle over their lifetime with two forces: one of them is their will to want, while the other is the necessity that befalls on them. At some times they are subjects who author a variety of initiatives, while at other times – unfortunately many times as often as that – they find themselves trapped by necessity and become an object, a plaything of other forces. This incessant conflict between the two roles is, as may be seen, something extremely important for people because it makes them always inclined to breed a fundamentally dichotomized vision of the world (Bauman 1966: 7).

In our daily life we come across many different realities, including cases when some contingent dilemmas emerge, imposed on us by the course of coincidences, in the face of which our primary principles – honor, loyalty and courage – are indispensable. Ultimately, the human being resolves such dilemmas in his/her conscience. The man who liked the motto quoted above took his secret with him to his grave. However, one thing that is certain is that the quoted aphorism constitutes an element of socially transmitted contents. Also, it is popular for it expresses in a brief form a message that reflects the gist of the most controversial issues that had become part and parcel of choices made by a few generations of the Poles. These involve, inter alia, the legendary status of the borderland cities, predominantly of Wilno and Lwów.

2.

At the same time, those two cities constitute two important centers of Polish national life abroad – in the so called *Kresy Wschodnie*. Also, for Ukrainians and Lithuanians respectively they have been the cities whose inclusion added some splendor to their states' sovereignty. The cities' histories are long enough to have bred stories about fantastic myths, extraordinary events, local heroes and to produce literature that endowed the two cities with some mythical aura (Papée 1924: 13, footnote; Łossowski 1985: 35 et al.; Cat-Mackiewicz 1972: 422–426).

Their inclusion in one state or another had been decided in the process of struggling for the shape of borderlines of the nascent Polish Republic after WW I. Roman Dmowski, the head of the Polish delegation at the Paris Peace Conference, outlined the Polish situation and the Polish territorial demands in detail on 29 January 1919 (Dmowski 1937: 26).

In addition, the histories of the two cities have also given rise to some legends during the military-political struggles that took place in the years of WW I. Especially Wilno came to be associated with the legend of Józef Piłsudski – Naczelnik Państwa [Head of the State] and Naczelnny Wódz [Commander-in Chief] (Garlicki 2008: 302). His sympathies, interests of the milieu he had originated from, the traditions in which he had been raised – all coalesced into the legendary status and a myth of Wilno. „No other city conquered by myself had I entered with this kind of a feeling that I had when arriving at Wilno. That sweet child singing, those fearful glances cast by mothers, those tears, those

sentiments... I was arriving there on horseback and... here there lay my city expecting me!... In my soul I felt I had completely triumphed” (Łossowski 1985). This kind of sentiment more than the knowledge of the historical realities of Wilno and the Lithuanians had formed the background for Piłsudski’s ideas regarding the Polish state’s eastern policy. As stated by S. Cat-Mackiewicz, „Wilno is a city where the fault lines of great political problems cross. Wilno is key to those problems. The Lithuanian issue, Belarusian and Russian, the future of the Baltic Sea and the policy in the Baltic region, the expansion of the Roman Catholic Church and the resistance of the Orthodox Church, the concept of the State and its rivalry with nationalism – not one of those issues may be tackled and resolved without bringing in the issue of Wilno” (Cat-Mackiewicz 1990: 123–124).

However, one should not forget that the legend of Wilno was also a by-product of the myth of the Polish Republic itself – as created by Piłsudski – in which it was to become a stronghold against Russia. It was to stay on guard and protect our security (Wapiński 1997: 135).

Piłsudski was less cordial as far as Lvov, having also much less to say about that city’s affairs – especially when we take into account the potential that he had at his disposal while being Naczelnny Wódz. No wonder that the defenders of the city – left behind abandoned – gave vent to their bitterness using the following words: „Help that we had expected from Poland, which was already free, frustrated our hopes every day, feeding old and generating new sentiments, prolonging the bloodshed and the struggles, and simultaneously amplifying the chances for a catastrophe to come. Our hope for this help was disappointed perhaps the most painfully, generating in our souls not only fear but also doubts whether Poland indeed had recognized Lwów’s cause for its own – the Polish cause” (Romer 1989: 44).

The legendary status of Lwów was born during short-lived but fierce struggles fought since 1 until 21 November 1918. Those struggles were dramatic enough to be quickly absorbed by the Polish patriotic tradition. The Ukrainian attack, launched on 1 November 1918, was labeled „coup d’etat”, which might have meant that their action had been organized and „aimed at a violent abolition of the central state authorities and at intercepting power by an individual or a group of persons in a manner not congruent with the Constitution”. Wishing to reinforce the drama of those events, its starting time – at 3.30 „a.m.” – is emphasized alongside the chief commander of the assault, while the event itself is described as the one that was „effectively managed”.

Well, while it could have been an action aimed at a „coup d’etat”, by necessity it must have been aimed against the Austrian rather than the Polish authorities. Anyway, what had shocked the Polish residents was the very fact that it were the Ukrainians who had initiated the fighting and the war which was to decide about the fate of not only that city but of the whole *Galicja*. However, it is difficult to preserve an impression that the Poles had been taken by surprise. The preparations for that action had been publicly known and the city inhabitants knew the date when the attack was going to be launched. What could be really surprising was the determination of the fighters, their wish to create *faits accomplis* and to intercept their city without waiting for the Peace Conference to decide about its fate. No wonder that this aspect was quickly used and taken advantage of by the Polish side who announced – on behalf of *Galicja Wschodnia*’s Polish residents – confidence and unbroken faith that „the Coalition’s victory guarantees a just order in the whole Europe, including satisfying all of the justified claims voiced by the Polish Nation” (*O niepodległą... 2007: 591*).

I am not in the position to resolve the many controversial issues that had amassed around the „Orlęta Lwowskie” legend. It might be quite symptomatic that the controversy involves an acrimonious debate over the exact date and hour when the Polish commandership was established with the mission to lead the defense of the city (Nicieja 2009: 32–33). On the other hand the researchers do not ask a more important question, that is how come and why that the defense of the city of Lvov at such a crucial moment of the war was just left to a handful of the Polish Legion soldiers who were aided by some university students and some of the Lvov residents – devoid of any military commandership, without any military strategy and without any arms to fight with. I have read reports that speak about those children’s and young people’s heroism, their chivalry, their will to make sacrifices and their being daring while sacrificing their lives. However, these reports should not be made into a shield that lets the adults’ conduct be obscured – the conduct of all those distinguished military commanders, politicians and representatives of the intelligentsia. A variety of Polish military organizations had stationed in the city of Lvov at that time, such as *Polskie Kadry Wojskowe* ([PKW] Polish Military Cadres) which formed a sort of a „military conspiracy” (*sprzysiężenie wojskowe*) and *Polska Organizacja Wojskowa* ([POW] Polish Military Organization) which had excellently organized intelligence with its own network of spies. There was an organization of Polish officers and soldiers headed by Colonel

W. Sikorski who at the time stayed at Przemyśl. The problem is that even in the situation of a direct threat looming over Lvov all those Poles had not been able to agree on any joint commandership. I do not even want to mention the subject of intelligence units which were at the time headed by Ludwik de Laveaux – the I Brigade of the Legions’ officer who did have some information about the planned date of the Ukrainians’ attack. In the province there were other „buoyant intelligence units” as well (Gaul 2001: 401).

Therefore, a lot of questions still wait to be answered if the „Orlęta Lwowskie” legend is to be more truthful. As a matter of fact the action carried out by secondary school pupils and university students who had defended their city constitutes another example of myth construction basing on the theme of children’s and youth’s spontaneity, their parents’ and of the city residents’ devotion to the cause. However, the lack of responsible commandership at deciding hours, personal ambitions, some disregard for the rank system and organizational hierarchies, and misinterpretation of the existing situation were so characteristic of the Polish mentality – which is even difficult to classify. Furthermore, there was something more to the adults’ behavior – something that cost the lives of so many young heroes. Maybe that was the time about which those bitter words have been written which state: „we arrived at such a state of our national life in which there is nothing that binds us all together and in which there is no deed that is accountable, and in which anyone may behave as he wishes on the political scene, and in which the most wicked act is only believed to be an expression of a different set of convictions” (Dmowski 1937: 26).

The deeper meaning inherent in the quoted remark applies not only to the legend of „Orlęta Lwowskie”, but epitomizes an even more extreme manner in which the legend of Wilno had been built. A commander gives an order to a lower rank officer simultaneously warning the latter with those words: „You must bear in mind that there might come times when Sejm and Senate and the whole Poland – even myself – will be forced to abandon you. You must be prepared to take responsibility for all this. This cannot be ordered upon you. Such things cannot be ordered” (Łossowski 1985: 154; Garlicki 2008: 353–354). The story of General Żeligowski’s „rebellion” or, as some prefer to call it, his „disobedience”, has already provoked rich literature. A biographer who mentions his rebellion is very brief while evaluating Żeligowski’s conduct. It was not W. Sikorski who called it rebellion. Besides this name was not the most important thing. Żeligowski’s attitude to his

„rebellion” is evidenced by his memoirs in which he takes Piłsudski’s version of those events for his own: „how could that be called a rebellion?”, we did not need to „rebel”, „we were returning home and no one could have forbidden that to us” (Fabisz 2007: 119, footnote 80). It was a socially meaningful event, but on a local scale – that is if we disregard its international repercussions. What had happened then in general might be illustrated by a description of what had happened in a small village of Warwiszki because of its inhabitants’ attitude. This village was situated at „the very southern tip of Lithuania, on the Niemen River, shielded by forests and swamps in the North”. At the end of 1920 Warwiszki found itself in a neutral zone in which refuge was being sought by „many Poles that had fled from Lithuania, who formed »Samorząd Warwiszkowski« [Warwiszki self-government] and declared their independence both from Lithuania and Poland. The Warwiszki guerilla attacked and harassed the Lithuanians. The Lithuanian guerilla decided to attack Warwiszki in revenge. They struck on 8 November 1921 but were defeated. The Lithuanian attack was re-launched with bigger forces in September 1922. After a day-long battle, when half of the village had been burnt, it was still not taken.

Those were very strange events. Warwiszki had survived for more than two years living their peculiar life which was a Polish life but the one that stretched between Lithuania and Poland. Fenced and guarded, surrounded by trenches, they resisted the enemy and turned their village into a veritable fortress. They had been a striking predecessor of the Polish fortified villages (*wsie warowne*) in Wołyń (Volhynia) during WW II (Łossowski 1985: 195–196).

However, this incident could have had more to do with lacking discipline, the state’s overall weakness and the general *anarchization* of social life than with Kresy’s „self-defense”. Warwiszki exemplify the Polish lawlessness, the Poles’ contempt for their state. Nonetheless, another of the Polish myths could be naturally constructed about the heroic village – I am leaving it to myth-makers though.

Unfortunately, I am not in the position to peruse the traces of the Wilno and Lvov myths in the subsequent years. Neither can I embark on an analysis of a mass of literature on that topic. One general remark needs to suffice, namely that the legend surrounding the two cities have continued to exist for many years already – the aphorism mentioned at the beginning of this paper evidences the vitality of the legends. Nevertheless, we should not ignore the fact that the Kresy Wschodnie mythology remains a source of many irritations, conflicts, tensions, provo-

cations and all of the other things typical of one's relations with one's neighbors. However, it is not my role to describe Polish-Lithuanian relations or Polish-Ukrainian ones, even though the majority of researchers agree on their evaluation. As far as the Polish-Lithuanian relations, their eminent student P. Łossowski wrote: „Two neighboring nations – Poles and Lithuanians. The former inhabiting an area along the major European routes in the Wisła (Vistula) and Odra (Oder) River basins, while the latter having their settlements in the middle of nowhere, somewhere along the Baltic coastline, for centuries hidden in their primeval forests on the Niemen River. History has intertwined their fates and integrated them only to tragically entangle them later. Their fates have led them from the closest of the unions, from an almost organic unity to the state of mutual alienation and avid hostility” (Łossowski 1985: 314).

Similarly, in the Polish-Ukrainian relations, Lwów has remained to be a hotbed of incessant clashes and conflicts, discussions and debates. The Ukrainians constituted the biggest ethnic minority in Poland but having had a long national history they were not quite happy to be contained within Poland's borders. They blamed the Poles because of them „the Ukrainian state had never been established even though in reality the Poles had nothing to do with it since the dominant majority of the Ukrainians – around 30 million – were Soviet Russia's citizens. Those Ukrainians that inhabited Poland demanded autonomy. From the beginning they constituted a big, reluctant and resistant national minority” (Torzecki 1993: 10–11).

What might breed some uneasiness in the milieu of those who study the Polish-Ukrainian relations – Professor D. Beauvois undoubtedly being one of them – is the fact that the legend, the myth and glamorization of events and individuals started to replace verified knowledge thus generating unhealthy emotions and controversies. „In the current situation, the change in mentality and political consciousness of the two nations seems most important and most urgent. It seems necessary for both sides to admit their guilt publicly and publicly forgive for the mutual guilt” (Beauvois 1996: 284). Those Poles who had been raised in Podole (Podolia) and know the roots of those tensions, such as W. Feldman, as early as the beginning of the XX century postulated that „it is necessary to implement political and economic reforms that take into account the Ukrainians' interests. Contempt and negation should be replaced with some understanding for the Ukrainian national-cultural aspirations. Their hunger for land should be satisfied” (Feldman 1907).

3.

It is time we answered the question suggested by the aphorism quoted at the beginning. Should Poland or should not have been established without those borderland cities? The Poles had already answered this question a long time ago, but it is never too late to have it repeated. Walerian Kalinka (1826–1886) in his *Żale Polaków na Zachód* [Complaints of Poles against the West] wrote about those who „with a smile verging on contempt” had said – having Królestwo Kongresowe (Congress Kingdom) in mind – that „he who has nothing ought not to disregard light-heartedly the partial good of the nation. Kraków was not built overnight and not once had Poland been partitioned” (Kalinka 2001: 224).

At present, when the Poles live „after the fourth partition”, the question what to choose sounds like a joke. One must repeat until bored that the last great war which had been fought by America and England allied with the Soviet Union against Hitler’s Germany was the war in which the whole world was interested because it was for the world important. „We were part of the victorious coalition and we were rewarded in territorial terms as generously as only rarely happens to small participants of big coalitions. Not to recognize this fact simply amounts to a lie which weakens our position in our international relations, if not at the moment, then in the near future” (Łagowski 2007: 411).

Magical thinking has persisted in the ensuing generations of the Poles as far as the Yalta conference is concerned, despite the debate that the historians have had for years – it seems that „history lessons are taught in front of an empty classroom” (Tazbir 2002: 341). This is why the number of those who believe in the legends and myths appears to be increasing. It is enough to look up Internet websites that crop up when the keyword „Kresy Wschodnie” is typed in. They testify that there is more appetite for exoticism than for sentimental memories. I am not that surprised because myself I am under impression of the gracefulness of the many Podolian cities and towns.

It seems correct to fight with myths but only in their political aspects since they verge on propaganda. Substantial research must be left to science for only science can, looking for and at source materials, undermine and weaken the impact of the mythical mentality. Ordering their demobilization as of 29 May of 1946, General Anders assured his soldiers that they would return to Poland for which they had been fighting for: „to this true Poland that no Polish heart can imagine

without Lwów and Wilno” (Anders 1959: 375; Pasierb 1968: 212–214; Kersten 1974: 138; Nurek 2009: 530). Has the commander-in-chief’s order remained in force until today and is it his soldiers – leaving now for their „eternal sentry” – who are bid farewell with the memento *Bez Lwowa i Wilna Polska być nie powinna?*

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